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ADOT puts together wish list of priorities

By **Andrea Kelly**

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

The State Board of Transportation wants to know how it should spend money it doesn't have.

On Thursday the board will solicit public comments on a list of priority projects it would build, if it had the money. The public hearing at the Manning House is more than just a hypothetical exercise, however.

Not coincidentally, a citizens' group is trying to put an initiative on the November ballot to raise the state sales tax by a penny per dollar for 30 years to pay for the projects.

Although the Arizona Department of Transportation cannot back an initiative petition drive, the initiative is geared toward raising money to pay for the state's unfunded projects list.

Besides numerous road projects throughout the state, the plan includes a Tucson-to-Phoenix train and expansion of the metro Phoenix commuter rail system and construction of a similar system in Tucson.

It's estimated the tax would bring in \$42 billion over 30 years, but it would boost sales-tax rates to 10 percent or more in many communities.

The initiative would provide money to get done some of the projects the state wants to do anyway, said state Transportation Director Victor Mendez.

The board may approve the department's plan Thursday.

"The board needs to consider a statewide transportation policy statement and long-range transportation plan," said State Transportation Board Chairman Si Schorr, a Tucson lawyer.

The board operates with a five-year transportation plan but also looks at longer-term planning on a regular basis, said Sally Stewart, state transportation spokeswoman.

If the initiative makes it to the ballot and is approved by voters, it would be a funding source for the long-term plan, Stewart said.

It's time for the state to look at other funding alternatives now that the state and federal gas taxes aren't bringing in as much revenue, Mendez said.

"From a funding standpoint, we are simply at a crossroads," Mendez said at a meeting in Tucson last week. "Seven years from now, we will be in a maintenance mode," with no money for new road projects or widenings.

"Our world has changed, and for us to believe more cars is going to solve the problem is unrealistic."

Victor Mendez, director of the Arizona Department of Transportation

transportation wish list

Some of the projects in Southern Arizona that could be included in the state transportation plan and paid for by a proposed 1-cent tax increase:

- Phoenix-Tucson passenger train
- Pima commuter-rail system
- Develop Pima express bus network
- Widen I-10 throughout state
- New lanes on I-19
- Double Arizona 85 from Lukeville to Ajo to four lanes
- Widen Arizona 86 (Ajo Way) in Pima County
- Widen Arizona 77 (Oracle Road) in Pima County and from Show Low to Holbrook
- Widen Arizona 90 from Benson to Sierra Vista
- Extend Barraza-Aviation Parkway
- New port of entry in Douglas
- Paving of International Border Road in Douglas
- Rebuild Broadway in Tucson
- Widen Twin Peaks Road and Ajo

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Although the initiative would go before voters in 2008, collections would not begin until January 2010, Mendez said.

The initiative backers are gathering signatures to get it on the ballot. If it makes it to the ballot and is approved by voters in November, the State Transportation Board would again have to vote on how the funding would be used, Schorr said.

Way, Tucson

- Reconstruct Sahuarita Road

Source: Arizona Department of Transportation

IF YOU GO

When: Thursday, 9 a.m.

Where: Manning House, 450 W. Paseo Redondo

What: public hearing on long-term state transportation priorities

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- Widen Twin Peaks Road and Ajo Way, Tucson
- Reconstruct Sahuarita Road

Source: Arizona Department of Transportation

• Contact reporter Andrea Kelly at 573-4243 or akelly@azstarnet.com.

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